

A peep into the some realities of Buddhism as practiced in Sri Lanka today

Professor Dhammavihari Thera

Mussat' ev' āpi sāsanaṃ Micchā ca paṭipajjati

He who resorts to or enters upon incorrect and unacceptable ways of life
consequently misses his own mission in life.

[Tissa Metteyya Sutta / Suttanipāta]

The Pali quotation with which we begin this study comes from the Tissa Metteyya Sutta of the Suttanipata, a book the majority of whose contents we hold in high esteem. Here a Buddhist disciple by the name of Tissa Metteyya wishes to know from none other than the Master himself the degeneracy and the devastation that would come upon a monastic who indulges in sexual gratification. He promises to discipline himself on hearing the Master's own interpretation. Here is Tissa Metteyya.

*Methunaṃ anuyuttassa -
iccāyasmā Tissa Metteyyo -
vighātaṃ brūhi mārisa.
Sutvāna tava sāsanaṃ
viveke sikkhissāmase.*

Suttanipata v.814

O Master ! Please tell me the ruin that comes upon him who indulges in sexual gratification. So questions the monk Tissa Metteyya. On hearing your message, I shall discipline myself in this life of renunciation.

Translation by the author

This article is based on two basic ideas of the above quote, namely *patipadā* or one's way of living in the world, and *sāsanaṃ* or the spiritual goal which one

strives to attain thereby within one's religious creed. In his reply to Tissa Metteyya, the Buddha highlights the fact that any breach of the prescribed and accepted patterns of behaviour would be a gross error or *micchā paṭipadā* [*micchā ca paṭipajjati*] which would defeat the very purpose of *pabbajjā* or the path of renunciation, i.e. *nekkhamma* [*mussat'ev'āpi sāsanaṃ*]. And the Master promptly adds the comment that such behaviour is truly ignoble: *etaṃ tasmim' anāriyaṃ*. We are convinced that these two ideas of *micchā paṭipadā* and fulfilment of the mission or *sāsana* are placed here as being mutually exclusive. One cannot carry on with both at the same time.

Primarily our concern in this study would be the life of the lay community, i.e. of the men and women of the household and their basic preparation, not losing sight of the higher ideal of the religion, namely *brahmacariya* [*brahma-cariya-pariyosānaṃ*] whose consummation is in the attainment of Nirvana. In pursuing this, we undertake, rightly or wrongly, an inquiry into some, we would indeed say limited, areas of what is being handed down and practised in Sri Lanka today as Buddhism, i.e. as a RELIGION which means a bundle of practices which are believed to be capable of bringing within the reach of humans every manner of their life expectations in areas like health, acquisition of wealth and prosperity, including success in education, examinations and rapid escalation in social life, not missing even areas like one's employment, whether it be in the state or private sector.

Within this periphery of religion, our Sri Lankan Buddhists are being encouraged and even assisted by their own clergy who, now are being efficiently advertised in our news papers and our manifold media for their erudition and their skills in many areas of life, to take over even from other religions acts of prayer and even humiliating appeals and supplications [*bāra hāra* and *yāga homa*] to various sources of power, including the use of associated items like talismanic *yantras*, *mantras* and *daehaenas* [like that of Sīvalī] to achieve these ends.

These promised rewards include miraculous successes like cure of diseases

through chanting of long-distance *pirit* over the telephone, from persons and places thousands of miles away, across oceans and continents as well as assistance in the performance of complicated surgery through the blessings of midnight *bodhi-pūjās* carried out at the other end from equally distant places, with the prayers for the successful performance by the surgeons, transmitted by well-wishing near relatives.

The tremendously successful proliferation of these reports through time and place in the Buddhist world is, percentage wise, very much more in Sri Lanka, and their unverified successes [and never their failures], being eagerly broadcast across the continents by equally eloquent men and women is essentially a question of supply and demand. Those who want to believe them and believe in them and publicise them for various private reasons, are easily in the majority, anywhere and everywhere.

We wish to touch on this subject right now. It is admittedly rather late in the day. We are very much distressed and suffer tremendous pain of mind at the disastrous deflection Buddhism is seen to be taking at the moment. It vaporises the concept of liberation in Nirvana out of the Buddhist mind. No two words, with a wished-for staggering rapidity. Mark my words, with a cheap substitute of imported heavenly bliss in its place. And the comforting and self-assuring wish to attain Nirvana in the end after a delightful rendezvous with the future Buddha Maitreya. This is eagerly promoted by Sri Lankan Buddhist monks everywhere, without any sense of insult that is hurled at our Śākyamuni Buddha thereby. We have neither bitterness in our hearts nor venom to spit at any one on this account. This phenomenon we witness today, in the stature we behold it, is, bewildering.

It would not be incorrect to say that it is undoubtedly an exuberant Buddhist efflorescence of post-independent or post-Buddha-Jayanti Sri Lanka. Both these events are of major socio-cultural value in the history of our island as well as of our culture. They have provided platforms for many newly emerging leaders, both monk and layman, in both areas of religion and politics. Both parties seem to

have known their market very well, what to sell and where to sell.

In the country at large, for the educationally less qualified on the one hand and for the economically less affluent on the other, there had to be new opportunities. The concept of political independence gave every body an island-wide insatiable thirst for a higher perch in their respective areas of economic well being, social pre-eminence, professional distinction and educational supremacy. In the area of religion, both monks and laymen, strove indefatigably hard to be able to play leadership roles, with or without adequate competence and qualification. In both areas, more often than not, people had to put up mock credentials before their audiences. Everybody wanted to be an accepted leader or authority in any area where they could work out an opening. One thing emerges clearly in this situation. People do not like to face the termination of their lives, unaccomplished. They do not seem to be adequately warned or forewarned about the possibility of un-notified death. So they would like to put off death and endeavour to live much longer, via any one they can harness. They would move heaven and earth in search of this. No matter how much, earlier or later, they get their wishes fulfilled in the process.

Are we humans sufficiently aware or do we adequately believe in the possibly down-to-earth physiological basis of our life's moderately acceptable good sides like freedom from serious diseases, and satisfactory life expectancy in an underworld-free society like today, or for our diligently earned material prosperity or intellectual achievements. To the Buddhists, these should very clearly be what they could achieve in this very life through their own energetic application as humans or *uṭṭhāna-adhigata*. They are more than adequately highlighted in Pali phrase in Buddhist books as *uṭṭhātā vindate dhanam* and *uṭṭhānādhigatam dhanam*. This aspect of human endeavour which men and women have to put in for their material prosperity is further emphasized with phrases like *sedā'vakkhittehi bāhā-bala-paricitehi dhammikehi dhamma-laddhehi bhogehi*. The resultant joys and comforts which one comes to enjoy here and hereafter could also possibly be the rewards of clean and serene living, much

more than as rewards from heavenly powers, as the Dhammapada clearly puts in the following:

*manasā ce pasannena bhāsati vā karoti vā
tato naṃ sukhaṃ anveti chāyā 'va an-apāyini*

Dhammapada v. 2.

This latter, both good and bad experience in the present life could also be what is transmitted as desserts through *saṃsāra*, from previous lives to the present. But it must be remembered that the Buddha himself is seen rejecting the idea that one's *karma* of one life time, good or bad, is transmitted in identical form to a succeeding one [this rejected idea of *a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye* is referred to as *kamma-sarikkhatā*].

People had begun, on the other hand to relate danger to success in their human life to factors which are far removed from down-to-earth life here. One of the foremost in this area is the ill-effects of the planetary system [*graha-aphala*] on humans. This is made to apply to any and every area of psycho-physical pathological conditions of the human, whether it be of the head or the heart. This is made applicable even to new born babies at the time of their birth, calling these birth-time inherited ill-forebodings or *janma-erāṣṭakas*. In these situations, we believe, of man's own ingenuity of creation, solutions had to be found for their correction, also through man's own ingenious creation

Humanity has witnessed, through the rolling on of the centuries, the incessant continuance of these processes of beliefs. It is only persons who thrive in the area of astrology, whether they be men, women or even Buddhist monks, both in the rural areas of the country-side or in the metropolitan urban culture of the larger cities who can effectively command control over these extra-terrestrial bodies in their bringing about fortune or in averting misfortune upon the earth-bound humans. Astrological experts or *nakṣatra-kāraṅkas* [i.e. monks as well as lay-men and lay-women], are known to undertake remedial action or *sānti-karma* for the alleviation or complete removal of these *graha-aphala* or planetary ill-

effects.

These are known to be purely astrological in their manipulation. But more recent years has witnessed the dragging in, and we would unhesitatingly say 'rather unscrupulous dragging in' of the Buddha's transcendental powers [i.e. *nava arahādi budu-guṇa*] and making them the power-base for dispelling planetary ill-effects. These chants are composed in rhythmic metrical form and commence with an address to the evil-generating Sun-god, for clemency via Buddha-power. It runs as follows.

*arahā budu-guṇen mage
hiruge aphala duruvevā*

By the power of the Buddha's being arahant,
may the planetary ill-effects of the Sun upon me
be removed.

Thus nine different rhythmic chants are produced for the nine planets and they are chanted in the Buddhist shrine room after offerings are made to the Buddha at the temple prayer time. All Sri Lankan Buddhist temples in England, more or less, have printed copies of these chants, laminated and kept, for the use of all worshippers.

Further to this, planetary conjunctions connected with these extra-terrestrial bodies, [i.e. the *nava-graha* or the nine planets] which go under the name of *nakṣatra* [Sinhala *naekaeta*] are also believed to provide auspicious moments for the undertaking and performance of all manner of work in the Buddhist homes like performing marriages, construction of new buildings, undertaking all educational activities like sitting for examinations and appearing before interview boards etc. etc. by the Sinhala Buddhists of Sri Lanka. Adhering meticulously to these specified times is believed to be highly efficacious, depending on the reputation and the skill of the *nakṣatra-kāraka*. The Buddhists who get these performed according to their wishes and needs see nothing irregular about such

practices. For the most part, they are even being sponsored by their own religious clergy.

But a story in the Jataka collection [Nakkhatta Jataka] makes the Buddha reject the power of planets or planetary conjunctions to bring about, by their self-contained power, success to humans on earth. It is the successful performance of activities, i.e. whatever you do, says the Jataka, which bring success. Awaiting the auspicious hour to arrive, is an utter waste of time. Success by-passes such credulous fools [*attho bālaṃ upaccagā.*] What will auspicious moments do? Here are the words of the Jataka.

*Nakkhattaṃ paṭimānentaṃ attho bālaṃ upaccagā.
Attho atthassa nakkhattaṃ kiṃ karissanti tārakā?*

What we have discussed so far are some ritualistic religious practices of Sri Lankan Buddhists with a view to examining their acceptability within the framework of basic Buddhist teachings. We would not accept their being practiced over long periods of time through history, decades, centuries or even more, as a valid reason for their further continuance. Time has come for a stricter and more honest examination of what the Buddha gave to the world as a brave new system of thinking with regard to the position of the human in the world and for a genuine liberation out of what is correctly comprehended as unsatisfactoriness or *dukkha* within it.

It is time that those placed at the top, both in the State as well as those in the Sāsana as monastic chiefs realised that reading *verbatim* the Pali Buddhist texts of the Tripiṭaka like the Dīgha and Majjhima Nikayas etc. etc. by thousands of multi-ethnic Buddhist monks gathered together from all over the world, would not save the noble teachings of the Buddha from the ever recurring contamination it is suffering today in the hands of self-appointed learned editors, singly and collectively. Even a quick look through the many computerised versions now available or the theatrically brought out new editions of the printed Pali Tripiṭaka texts reveals this. Even the Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Pali texts, unfortunately are

not completely out of this.

Believed to be effectively interfering with the life of the humans in our living world is also the world of dead humans who are seriously believed to be born in despicably miserable states as *mala-preta* [hungry ghosts] and *mala-yakṣa* [i.e. dead born in the realm of powerfully vicious demons]. who come back to harass their former kinsmen or those with whom they have had strained relationships. This belief in communication with the dead applies equally well to the blessings and the benevolence towards the humans i.e. good health, affluence and success and prosperity for which the humans in the living world are banking on many unknown sources outside the living realm of humans. Many benevolent deities from alien religious mythologies had begun to make their way into the religio-cultural life of the Buddhists of Sri Lanka. Viṣṇu is one one of the earliest to gain entry into this arena of somewhat hybrid thinking, amply supported by our own chronicle writing like the Mahavamsa. He is considered the appointed guardian of Sri Lankan Buddhism, together with the assistance of Uppalavaṇṇa. This is where religious thinking of Buddhism and popular speculation on the phenomenon of life are found to be at variance and far removed from each other.

Let us begin with popular speculation. First and foremost, in the ancient pre-Buddhist Indian thinking, the planetary set-up of our solar system is believed to be tied up with human life on this *terra firma*. Every birth of human life on this earth is viewed as being tied up in diverse ways, both benevolent and malevolent, with the sun, moon and stars of the cosmic system, i.e. with the nine planets or the *nava-graha* system.

We use the phrase *realities of Buddhism* to examine and probe into the correctness or other-wise of what is believed in or indulged in as living Buddhism. We shall also, in the process, indicate the basic nature of the *vital truths* of Buddhism like the four noble truths without a total apprehension and appropriation of which in one's life no liberation in Nirvana can ever be achieved. The creed founded by Śākyamuni Buddha Gotama of India at least five hundred years before the birth of Christ and known today as Buddhism has passed

through a long period of time of more than two and a half millennia. This vast stretch of time has witnessed the presence of Buddhism in many lands outside India. China, Korea and Japan show evidence of this even up to this day. Buddhism's entry into and development in Middle East countries like Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, to the west of India is much less known.

819. Methunamanuyuttassa (metteyyāti bhagavā)

Mussatevāpi sāsanaṃ,

Micchā ca paṭipajjati

Etaṃ tasmīṃ anāriyaṃ Mahanidesa

Micchā ca paṭipajjatīti - 'pāṇampi hanti, adinnampi ādiyati, sandhimpi

chindati, nillopampi harati, ekāgārikampi karoti, paripanthepi tiṭṭhati,

paradārampi gacchati, musāpi bhaṇatīti 'micchā ca paṭipajjati. '